

## The Purpose of 1 Peter

1 Peter is a rich theological letter written to modern day exiles - Christians spread all over the world. Peter writes a deeply pastoral letter to Christians, calling them to live out such good lives among an unbelieving world even in the midst of suffering. And in 2020, as we care for our youth struggling with isolation and various degrees of suffering, being surrounded by an unbelieving world, it promises to be a big challenge for us to teach it, let alone live it out. Scot McKnight puts it this way:

The issue facing the Christians in Asia Minor was disturbingly simple: How should we live in this context of social exclusion and persecution? Should we escape into a more sheltered world? Should we withdraw from society? Should we turn a cold shoulder to our world? Should we denounce society in poetic and prophetic tones? How then should we live? Peter's letter is a window into a situation that even throws light on our world; his letter is one of the first struggles in the church with society.<sup>1</sup>

As we study the book of 1 Peter, there is much for us to learn and to be encouraged by, as we are called to live as Christ's people in a world that opposes him. We can have comfort and confidence in the face of suffering because of the living hope God has given us. "*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.*" (1 Peter 1:3-4) As we work through 1 Peter together, may our vision of this inheritance and the glory God has stored up for his people lift our eyes and sustain our lives as we live godly lives in the face of suffering, persecution and rejection.

### Authorship

The author's tagline in 1 Peter claims that the letter is from Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1a). Given that only one Peter is listed as an apostle in the Gospels (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 4:14-16; Acts 1:13) - Simon, son of John, who was

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<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, 1 Peter, *NIVAC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 37.

given the name Peter/Cephas by Jesus. Within the text, there are a couple of clues that support this signature:

- In 1 Peter 5:1, the author claims to be a witness of Christ's sufferings (which he describes in 1 Peter 2:21-25) - something unique to the apostles and a very small group outside of them.
- In 1 Peter 5:1-4 (and 1 Peter 2:25), Peter uses the language of shepherd when describing the role that the elders in the church play, possibly referring to the charge Jesus gave him in John 21:15-19 to feed and care for his sheep.

Outside of 1 Peter, there is other evidence that Peter wrote this letter. In 2 Peter 3:1, Peter claims that this is his second letter to the audience, suggesting that his earlier letter was indeed his.

Outside of the New Testament, the early church was very comfortable to accept that Peter was the author of 1 Peter. Irenaeus (an early Church Father in the 2nd Century AD) quotes from 1 Peter and explicitly names him:

...Peter says in his Epistle: "Whom, not seeing, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, ye have believed, ye shall rejoice with joy unspeakable..."<sup>2</sup>

Overall, there's very strong evidence (both inside and outside of 1 Peter) that the apostle Peter himself wrote the epistle.

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenæus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 4.9.2, 472.

## Original Audience

Peter writes “To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia...” (1 Peter 1:1b). In other words, to Christians who live in the far reaches of the Roman Empire (as can be seen in Figure 1).

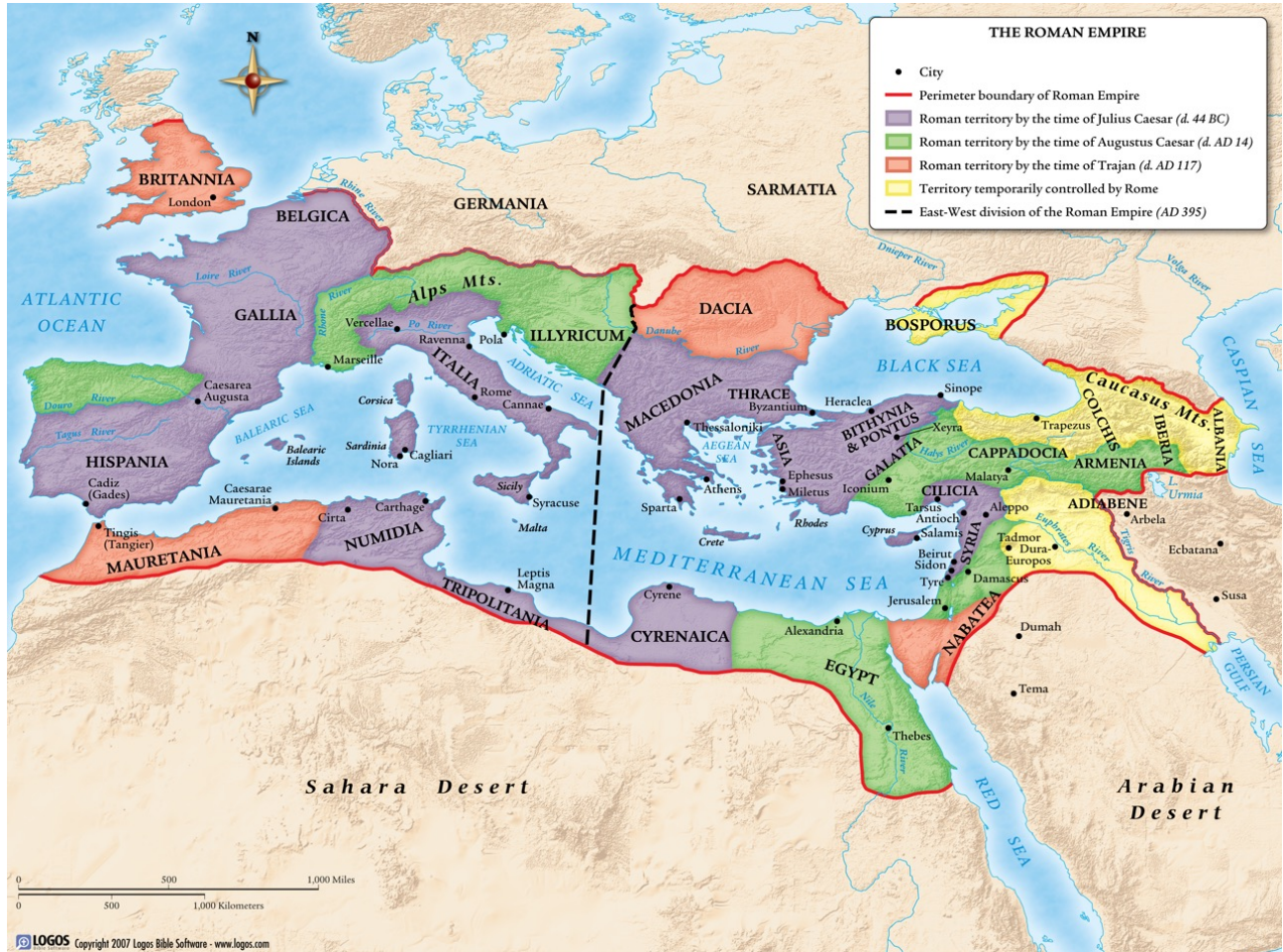


Figure 1: Map of the Roman Empire

Based on a reading of 1 Peter, we see that these Christians are suffering for their faith in Christ (1 Peter 1:6-7; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; 5:12). They are suffering social exclusion as they choose not to participate in “...doing what the pagans choose to do...” (1 Peter 4:3-4). And even though they suffer, Peter reminds them that Christians all over the world suffer too (5:9). In addition, some of these Christians suffer because of their close relationships with non-Christians (e.g. slaves to masters, 2:18-21; wives to husbands 3:1-6).

One further indication of who is in this audience is in the language used to describe them; in 1 Peter 2:9-10, Peter writes “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” This language is reminiscent of the language God uses in Exodus 19:4-6 in describing the people of Israel. It seems that he is applying this language anew to the people of God in these churches, no longer just those of Jewish heritage, but to the mixture of Jews and Gentiles who make up this church.

### **Final Date of Composition**

Given we take 1 Peter to be written by Peter during a time of persecution, and the use of the word “Babylon” as code for Rome (compared with Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2) alongside Church history which indicates that Peter died in Rome, we have a date range of 62-66AD within which Peter wrote 1 and 2 Peter, before dying under Nero’s localised persecution of Christians. This is around the same time period that Paul was in Rome, but since Peter doesn’t refer directly to him in his letter, it is less likely to be prior to 62AD (when we deduce that Paul was in Rome).

Overall, it seems likely that 1 Peter was written sometime between 62 and 64AD.

### **Genre**

1 Peter is typical of the epistles used throughout much of the New Testament (and the wider Greco-Roman epistles). Blomberg writes that the structure of short Hellenized letters included:

...(1) The letter begins with an *introduction*, containing (a) the writer's name, (b) the addressees, and (c) a short greeting. (2) It continued with brief words of *thanksgiving* and/or a wish or prayer for the well-being of the recipients. (3) *The body of the letter came next*, (a) conveying the primary *information* the writer wanted to communicate, followed by (b) a section of requests or *exhortation* of the recipients when needed. The epistle then concluded with (4) *closing greetings*.<sup>3</sup>

As we see in 1 Peter, the letter bears all these marks; there's the introduction with all the features, followed by the words of thanksgiving, containing the body of the letter including exhortations and requests and finally, closing greetings.

### **1 Peter for Today**

A Church scattered throughout the world, with Christians being very much in the minority of their local provinces and nations. Christianity being perceived, not just a harmless alternative way of life, but subversive and harmful to the social fabric of society. A time of active transition between the Godly order of older Christian leaders, and a new generation who are called to step up and lead God's people. This description is just as accurate of the church in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia as it is of 21st Century Australia. For the earliest days of the Church, Christianity was a minority facing ongoing persecution. And, after more than a millennium of Western cultural privilege, once again the Church is facing persecution and rejection. Are we ready?

Into our context Peter speaks a refreshing pastoral word, calling for Christians to be prepared for being rejected, persecuted and in the minority. We aren't to lament the death of Christendom, but instead we are to live such good lives in this world in the hope of giving people a reason for the hope we have as we suffer as our Lord suffered. Christians who work for unsympathetic employers who oppose our beliefs. Christians who are

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<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos : Acts to Revelation, New Testament Introduction and Survey* vol II (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2006), 95.

married to unbelieving spouses. Christians who are rejected by friends and family because of our beliefs. This letter is written to us. And Christians who aren't yet ready to suffer for their faith in any of these ways and more. This letter is especially written to us. It's the vaccine we need to prepare ourselves for the rejection, opposition, persecution and discrimination that are coming and are already here.

Peter doesn't do this by calling us to toughen up or to maintain a stiff upper lip. Instead, he points us to the glorious hope which we have in Christ Jesus. He calls us to set our sights on the living hope that will be revealed on the day when Jesus comes. In the face of suffering, we don't wilt, but thrive and grow ever more into that glorious inheritance that can never be harmed. And that's the hope we hold onto.

## The Structure and Content of 1 Peter

1 Peter is a short letter which is broken up by Peter directly addressing his audience as “dear friends” or “beloved,” occurring in 1 Peter 2:11 and 1 Peter 4:12. It’s possible to further divide 1 Peter within these sections, but on the whole these two vocative addresses set the letter’s boundaries.

### I. Introduction and greetings (1:1-2)

### II. The Living Hope which the People of God Have (1:3-2:10)

1. The salvation of God’s people’s souls, achieved in Christ (1:3-12)
2. Exhortations to live in response to this hope
  - a) Set your hope in Christ (1:13)
  - b) Be holy and obedient (1:14-16)
  - c) Live in reverent fear (1:17-21)
  - d) Love one another (1:22-25)
  - e) Grow up in your salvation (2:1-3)
  - f) Grow together as God’s people (2:4-10)

### III. Live out Godly Lives in the midst of Suffering (2:11-4:11)

- A. The principle: abstain from sinful desires and live good lives among the pagans. (2:11-12)
  1. Setting 1: everyone submitting to human authority structures (2:13-17)
  2. Setting 2: slaves submitting to earthly masters (2:18-20)
    - a) Following the example of Christ in suffering unjustly (2:21-25)
  3. Setting 3: wives submitting to non-Christian husbands and living in godly ways (3:1-6)
  4. Setting 4: husbands being considerate to their wives and leading in prayer (3:7)
  5. Setting 5: Christians living godly lives within the church (3:8-12)
- B. Suffering now by abstaining from sinful desires and living good lives among the pagans leads to glory later (3:13-4:11)
  1. Suffering now as those who do good (3:13-17)
  2. Christ also suffered now for good, and was later made alive and brought to glory (3:18-22)

3. Suffering now is a way we put sin to death, living for God instead of ourselves (4:1-6)

C. Living good lives within the church community (4:7-11)

IV. Live out Godly Lives as God's people (4:12-5:11)

A. Suffering now is how God's people participate with Christ (4:12-19)

B. Instructions for elders in the church (5:1-4)

C. Instructions for younger people in the church (5:5a)

D. Instructions for all the church (5:5b-9)

1. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (5:5b)

2. Humble yourselves under God (5:6)

3. Cast anxiety on God (5:7)

4. Be alert (5:8)

5. Resist the devil (5:9)

E. Closing doxology/prayer (5:10-11)

V. Conclusion (5:12-14)

A. Peter's purpose line (5:12)

B. Greetings from those with Peter (5:13)